

# A TALE OF TWO GANDIDATES

Two politicians sought election to the New Jersey State Assembly in November 2005. One is a Democrat, the other a Republican. One won, one lost. The twist in this tale: Both are Indian Americans.

By ASHISH KUMAR SEN

**D**riving down Oak Tree Road in Franklin Township, New Jersey, storefronts bedecked with Indian saris, gold jewelry and posters of Bollywood stars flash past. Neon signs beckon passersby to try tasty treats at Kabab King. Another sign announces your arrival at Mahatma Gandhi Plaza in Iselin, a shopping center dominated by Indian stores.

An hour's train ride from the bustle of Manhattan, this decidedly is the *desi* heartland of New Jersey. Of course, the posters at the railway station in the town of Edison, portraying Amitabh Bachchan promising the next *crorepati*, should have been a dead giveaway.

Given this introduction to New Jersey, the image of two men of Indian origin vying for seats in the state's Assembly in the November 8 election was not an incongruous one.

In New Jersey, state legislators are elected from 40 districts of substantially equal population. The voters in each district elect one senator and two members of the General Assembly. In District 17, where Democratic voters outnumber Republicans three to one, two incumbent Democrats were re-elected to the Assembly: Upendra Chivukula, a native of Andhra Pradesh, and Joseph V.

Egan. The two Republican candidates—Dr. Salim Nathoo, an Indian American born in Tanzania, and Catherine J. Barrier—were defeated.

Egan won 28,598 votes, Chivukula 27,364, Barrier 15,309 and Nathoo 13,204.

News reports in India and the United States had misreported that the election was a direct matchup between Chivukula and Nathoo. "We kept trying to explain to voters that they could vote for both Upendra and me. There were two seats, it wasn't an either-or situation," says Nathoo.

District 17 comprises Franklin Township, Highland Park, Milltown, Piscataway and New Brunswick, location of the campus of Rutgers University and the world headquarters of Johnson & Johnson, the multinational firm that manufactures personal hygiene products.

Once a center for immigrants from Eastern Europe, 14 percent of New Brunswick's population is now of Asian descent, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. It also has a 39 percent Hispanic and 20 percent African American population.

Chivukula, 55, was born in Nellore district in Andhra Pradesh. He came to the United States in 1974 to pursue a graduate degree in electrical engineering from City



Courtesy, Office of Assemblyman Upendra Chivukula

*Upendra Chivukula (seated at right) interacts with his colleagues in the New Jersey General Assembly in December 2005 after re-election.*

College of the City University of New York. A resident of Franklin Township, he is the first South Asian to serve in the New Jersey Legislature, which comprises two houses: a 40-member Senate and an 80-member General Assembly. He is also the fourth Indian American to be elected to state office in the United States and served as mayor of Franklin Township in 2000, deputy mayor in 1998 and on the Franklin Township Council from 1997 to 2005.

Elected in November to his third term in the state Assembly, Chivukula attributes his political success to “constituent work.”

“Being accessible to the constituents is the most important thing in politics,” he says. “I do have some good legislation in terms of science and tech, consumer-related legislation...and I am trying to get property tax relief for widows of veterans. I am also 100 percent supportive of the Democratic agenda of providing relief to local towns and schools.”

Chivukula’s family was not political, but in the mid-1980s he felt Asian Americans were not engaged. “I wanted to work as a volunteer and get them involved in politics,” he explains. “The [Indian American] community has been coming forward and at least trying, but I’m not so sure if they have been very successful.”

Chivukula, who is also managing director of the Antarctica Group, a New York-based consulting company in software and education, says a life in politics requires some sacrifices. “It is a real challenge in terms of balancing personal, political and business life. You have to manage your time reasonably well. At the same time you cannot deny your constituents and the problems facing them,” he says. “What is important is being proactive.” Chivukula says his wife Dayci and their children—Suraj and Damianty—played a significant role in his campaign.

Like the Chivukulas, Nathoo’s young family—wife Sholina, an accountant who

is studying to become a teacher, and their two sons, Isaac, 6, and Adam, 5—handed out campaign leaflets at local supermarkets. A Muslim dentist who was born in Tanzania but has family roots in Jamnagar, Gujarat, Nathoo, 50, came to the United States in 1980. After completing his PhD in biochemistry from New York University in Manhattan, he was offered a job with Colgate-Palmolive and moved to Piscataway, where the firm’s research facility is located.

Frustration with the callousness of the local government drove him into politics, he says. Nathoo asked the local mayor several times to reduce the speed limit of 72 kph on the road running past his home. “I thought it was unsafe. I fought with the township for 10 years and eventually told the mayor the only way I could get this reduced was if I ran against him!” Nathoo’s bid for a seat on the Piscataway Town Council was unsuccessful, but the defeat did not deter him. “The more involved I got the more I found out that these people take everyone for granted—our taxes keep going up, our schools are crowded. We are paying so much in property taxes. There is no value for money,” he says. Eventually the speed limit was reduced by eight kph, but Nathoo is not satisfied. “We want it to go to 56 kph,” he says.

While local issues like high property taxes and overcrowding at schools mold the political debate in District 17, voters and candidates were not immune to national issues. Chivukula says the war in Iraq was a “big factor” in the election.

“All our funds are being diverted overseas [to fight the war]. This fact was highlighted when Hurricane Katrina struck and we were helpless....We have issues with respect to funding, homelessness, poverty, health care and ethics in government,” he says. “We also need to look at medical malpractice, which is very important to Asian Americans,” many of whom are in the medical profession.

Nathoo says the state is in dire need of property tax reform, and alleges, “Our money gets wasted through no-bid contracts and pay-to-play politics. If a contractor wants something he pays a politician for a contract. The system gets corrupt and all the services that we buy cost more. If these cost more we have to pay higher taxes.” He feels the solution is to put a moratorium on property tax increases and for the state government to renegotiate overpriced contracts.

Neither candidate felt outsourcing of jobs to India and China was a big election issue. “We all know businesses are shifting out of New Jersey because of how prohibitively expensive it is to do business here,” says Nathoo, who runs Oral Health Clinical Services, a firm that tests dental products.

Dev Joshi, executive producer of the “Glimpses of India—Bharat Darshan” radio show that airs on the New Brunswick station WRSU-FM 88.7 every Sunday afternoon, says that President George W. Bush’s low approval ratings among voters didn’t help Nathoo and other Republican candidates.

Nathoo “had another disadvantage and

## Focus On: NEW JERSEY

**N**icknamed the Garden State, New Jersey is the home of the Miss America pageant, Princeton University and the laboratory where Thomas Edison invented the electric light bulb. More than six percent of the population is of Asian heritage, most of them Indian Americans. It boasts the world’s largest free-flying flag, the longest boardwalk and the biggest kite festival. Heavy industries such as petroleum, chemicals and pharmaceuticals are the backbone of the economy, giving parts of the state a reputation for bad smells and pol-

luted air. Yet the central coast is home to some of the cleanest beaches on the East Coast. New Jersey is completely surrounded by water, except for the 80-kilometer stretch that borders New York State. Many New Jersey residents commute to work in New York. Tourism is the second largest revenue earner. Atlantic City is a big draw, with its gambling and entertainment casinos. It was on the city’s eight-kilometer oceanfront boardwalk that the first Miss America contestants posed in their bathing suits in 1921. —A.V.N.



that is he hasn't been involved in politics as long as his opponents. Chivukula is a smart guy who makes himself visible, accessible and approachable. He is genuine and honest," says Joshi.

Joshi, whose show broadcasts across central New Jersey, concedes that Nathoo had some "very fresh" ideas about how to lower taxes and health insurance costs.

Nathoo's statements on the war do not differ from the Democrats. He wants to see the troops come home as soon as possible. "We need a plan and we need a plan now," he says. "Being Muslim, I know that there are some Islamic communities [in America] that are very concerned about this."

The outcome of the election is a close reflection of the political makeup of District 17, with almost three times as many registered Democratic voters as Republicans. Only three other districts in New Jersey had a lower percentage of registered Republicans in 2001.

Besides Chivukula and Egan, Bob Smith, a Democrat and an attorney, represents the region in the Senate.

Ironically, Nathoo was once a Democrat, and Smith is his next-door neighbor in an office complex in Piscataway. "Bob kept trying to persuade me to run on a Democratic ticket and would say I had a much better chance of winning that way," recalls Nathoo. However, he is disenchanted with the Democrats.

"As a former Democrat I think they

take us for granted. They don't feel they have to do anything for the Indian American community because they already have our vote," he says.

On the other hand, the Republican Party is more receptive, he says. "We have the same ideals. We have the same goals and objectives—there is a more natural connection."

Nathoo was handicapped by the fact that he joined the campaign late after his friend and the original candidate, Charles Edwards, died of a heart attack. "I had been thinking about running...and then when Charles died I had to do it for his sake," Nathoo says.

At close to six percent of District 17's population, Indian Americans did not have enough voting power on their own to determine the outcome of the election.

"In order to win elections you have to gain the support of the people. You cannot restrict yourself to the Indian vote," says Chivukula. He says that having another Indian American in the running didn't change the way he conducted his campaign.

Acknowledging that Indian Americans have also helped him, he adds, "It is relatively new for them to give money in political contributions. It's a matter of how they can effectively channel their

funds. There are many differences within our community. Rather than 10 different organizations giving \$1,000 it would be better if one would give \$100,000."

Nathoo, also, says he didn't go after the Indian American vote. "The issues that affect my district are the same that affect everyone else. However, I did get a lot of support from the Indian American community."

There are some issues that are specific to Indian Americans, he says. Indian American children have more trouble getting into good schools and medical colleges, he says, alleging that schools are reluctant to fill their classrooms with straight-A students for fear of losing funding, while others are wary of creating a racial imbalance. "If they admit people based on grades then they would have far more Indians in schools. They don't want that racial imbalance. I think that is wrong," he says.

Indira Sinha, shopping with her family at Rajbhog Sweets—a vegetarian Indian-Pakistani restaurant in Iselin, a city where according to the 2000 U.S. Census 17 percent of the population was Asian Indian, says the fact that there were candidates of Indian origin in the election was just an added bonus. "To me it's the issues that are important. Chivukula has delivered for us these past few years. You tend to stick with a familiar name," she says.

Browsing among intricate gold jewelry at KB Zaveri jewelers in Iselin, Radhika Singh, an executive who commutes to work in New York, acknowledges it was unusual for two Indian Americans to be in the same race in District 17. Still, she says, "They may be Indians but when it comes to politics they are either Red or Blue—Republican or Democrat."

Cynthia Jackson, tiptoeing across an icy sidewalk along Oak Tree Road, says she didn't realize Chivukula and Nathoo are of Indian origin: "They've both been a part of this community for so long I've never thought of them as outsiders." □

---

*Dr. Salim Nathoo buys paan in a shop on Oak Tree Road in Edison, New Jersey, in December 2005. He lost the November 8 state Assembly election.*



ASHISH KUMAR SEN

---

**About the Author:** Ashish Kumar Sen is a Washington-based journalist working with The Washington Times. He also contributes to The Tribune and Outlook.